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ABSTRACT

This paper explains how teachers can set up good research problems to study in their classrooms. The purpose of the research is to provide teachers with a tool for reflection, change, learning, and renewal in student-centered classrooms. Teacher-researchers learn to ask critical questions, collect data, document findings, and share results with other educators through professional journals and conferences. To decide upon a research question, teachers should think about what they want to know about themselves professionally, what they want to explore in the classroom, what does and does not work in the classroom, persistent problems that need attention, specific student issues, and interesting information from the professional literature to explore in the classroom. Examples of research questions include examining what activities encourage students to revise their writing, how students evaluate their peers' reading and writing, how theory meshes with classroom reality, and which areas of concern they have experienced as student teachers. To get started, teachers must examine how to begin, how to focus the inquiry, how to find time for research, when to make field notes, how to analyze data, what issues constitute stumbling blocks, and with whom to share the research. Study partners or study groups are very useful when conducting classroom research. (SM)

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A QUICK HISTORY AND SOME GENTLE GUIDELINES FOR A TEACHER-AS-RESEARCHER PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

As I remind my student teachers in language arts, the concept of teacher-as-researcher has been around for a very long time with deep roots in the field of education and Western thought. If what we mean by teacher-as-researcher involves teachers linking theory into practice, addressing classroom problems, sharing classroom research, generating teacher empowerment, and providing opportunities for renewal and continuous staff development, then teacher-as-researcher is not new -- at all. In this paper, I take my new teachers through a quick overview of how to set-up a good research problem to study in their classrooms.

A QUICK HISTORY AND SOME GENTLE GUIDELINES FOR A TEACHER-AS-RESEARCHER PROJECT

As I remind my student teachers in language arts before they push off to unchartered territory, the concept of teacher-as-researcher has been around for a very long time with deep roots in the field of education and Western thought. If what we mean by teacher-as-researcher involves teachers linking theory into practice, addressing classroom problems, sharing classroom research, generating teacher empowerment, and providing opportunities for renewal and continuous staff development, then teacher-as-researcher is not new -- at all.

Where the practice may have some origins is in Aristotle's notion (4th century B.C.) of the observer's role in constructing reality in relation to clarifying beliefs and understandings. Teachers who are consumate observers do this well. Or, perhaps teacher-as-researcher could have become established with many of the great teacher/philosophers of student-centered practices such as Comenious (1640's) who wrote *Pampaedia*, a teatise on child observation that lead to subsequent teaching methods; Rousseau (1762) who wrote *Emile*, a fictional work on observing the child in relation to nature; and Pestalozzi (late 18th century) who encouraged inquiry methods of observation to meet the needs of disadvantaged, orphan children. Or, perhaps the stronger link of classroom observation into practice came with Francis Parker (1880's) who encourage teachers in his Cook County Schools in Illinois to observe children and to publish their studies in *The Elementary School Teacher and the Course of Study*, a monograph series; John Dewey (1890's) who put his education theories, based on observation of students, into practice in his lab school in Chicago; and Maria Montessor (1907) who began training teachers to use observation and experimentation in her schools in Italy. Perhaps the notion of teacher-as-research became further fueled through "action research" during W.W. II in which Kurt Lewin proposed that qualitative studies be generated to solve social problems or through Stephen Cory (1950's) who with colleagues at Teachers College, Columbia University, coordinated studies by teachers across the country through the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation. In the present, we see such names as Laurence Stenhouse and John Elliott (1970- present) who supported and collaborated with British teacher researchers through the Center for Applied Research in Education and the Cambridge Institute of Education, a network to teacher researchers. Today, many institutes, collaboratives, professional development schools, and professional organizations (NCTE. IRA) support the very same notions

that can be traced through this distinguished history. I tell my student teachers before they begin their teacher-as-research projects during their field experience practicum that they can be proud to join such an illustious history of to use what they learn from research to provide better learning opportunities for their students. (For a further discuss of the history of teacher-as-researcher, see McFarland and Stansell, 1993, "Historical Perspectives" and McFarland, K. P.,1990, Appendix B: "Teacher-As-Researcher Time Line," 1990.)

Before, I can expect my student teachers to latch on to a good research question, I take them through a quick overview of how to set-up a good research problem to investigate in their classrooms. Below , you will find what I share with my student teachers. It is my hope that such an outline will help any teacher new to the practice of classroom observations for the improvement of teaching practices.

Why teacher-as-researcher? - The purpose of such research is to provide teachers with a tool for reflection, change, learning, and renewal in the student-centered classroom. The teacher-researcher movement has gained more recent prominence as more teachers begin to study their own classroom. More than ever before, such reflective practices hold great promise for staff development, teacher empowerment, and linking theory-into-practice.

Teacher-researchers learn to ask critical questions, collect data, document findings, and share the results with other educators either informally or formally through professional journals and conferences. As a result, teacher-researchers are gaining much respect for their contributions that they make to both knowledge and practice in their respected fields and use what they learn from research to provide better learning opportunities for their students.

As a unique branch of research, teachers from a variety of areas report that research in their classrooms provides many purposes such as:

Makes the classroom more exciting.
Forces us to collaborate.
Search for better methods of teaching.
Promotes in-depth method of study.
Reflect more about students' learning.
Forces us to look beyond "pat" answers.
Helps us take control of professional life.
Empowers us to grow professionally.
Makes you a better teacher.
Makes us want to share our findings.
Attempts to solve classroom problems.
Reflects practical and authentic context.
Become more student-centered.
Makes impact on how we teach.
Prevents burn-out.
Generate meaningful questions.

How do you decide on a research question? The following questions will help you focus your research question:

1. What would I like to know about myself as a professional?
2. What am I curious about exploring in my classroom?
3. What works well and what does not in my classroom to document?
4. Is there a persistent problem which I would like to look at more closely?
5. Is there something I want to understand better about a particular student?
6. What do I find interesting in the professional literature to explore in my classroom?

What are some good research questions? All research starts with a good question. Here are some examples that Hubbard & Power (1993) have pursued as well as a few others to consider:

1. What activities promote or encourage students to revise their writing?
2. How does a process writing approach affect the growth of students' skills in the mechanics of writing?
3. How does a whole language, process approach affect a learning-disabled child?
4. How does a whole language, process approach affect students-at-risk?
5. What sort of language is used in history and what role does it play?
6. What can my fifth graders and I learn about writing if I ask them to respond to a paper I have written?
7. What is the difference between the genres of writing used by students on a class message board and those in writing folders?
8. How do students evaluate the reading and writing of their peers?
9. How does the theory learned at the university level mesh with the reality of the classroom?
10. Which spelling and/or vocabulary method works best with my students?
11. Which methods or strategies involve students more successfully in learning?
12. What stages or areas of concern have I experienced as a student teacher?

How do you get started? Like many processes, the following stages will guide you from finding a good question to sharing the findings:

How do you begin? (This should be done during the first week.)

1. Start "kid-watching" and record your daily observations in journal form.

2. Record what interests you and pursue it. Reread it to discover patterns.
3. Begin to ask questions about a particular area of interest or problem.

How do you focus your inquiry?

1. Continue to generate classroom observations on a daily basis.
2. Questions which generate descriptions will evolve out of observations.
3. Keep questions open-ended so that other questions can emerge.
4. Invite another professional into your classroom to make observations.

How do you find time to do research?

1. Continue to generate class observations as a natural part of your day.
2. Make research questions an extension of your teaching questions.
3. Use any extra time to read professional literature and to write findings.

When do you make field notes?

1. Create brief moments during class while students work to
2. Record observations as soon as possible for later reflection.
3. Use tape-recorder for reflections while driving home; transcribe later.

How do you analyze your data?

1. Look over observational notes and pull data related to research question.
2. Compare data to previous data as a comparison and contrast analysis that eventually forms properties to be classified.
3. Continue to compare/contrast data and to ask more refined questions.
4. Look for several conclusions which emerged from the data.

What are some of the stumbling blocks?

1. The scope of the problem may be too big.
2. Questions keep changing and changing and changing.
3. Problems spring up that make study more difficult.
4. Classroom study involves too much time and effort.
5. Data is overwhelming and difficult to analyze.
6. Data decisions are needed of what to throw out and what not.
7. Researcher needs to have a background on the research literature.
8. Need to account for any biases that get in the way of research.
9. Difficult to study classroom practices without proper support.

With whom do you share your research?

1. Share your research with your students and colleagues.
2. Write articles for journals and submit proposals to conferences.
3. Share your findings during inservice programs.

What is the role of local forum? - During the semester, I would like for you to have a partner that may play many roles in this process. If you choose, we may begin a study group for the purposes of professional inquiry, development, and support. Below is a list of roles that your partner or study group may provide:

1. To listen respectfully to other ideas for research.
2. To help each member define a research question.
3. To ask questions that help the researcher to further thinking.
4. To suggest teaching methods, to give advice, or to swap teacher ideas.
5. To suggest further work to clarify thinking.
6. To generate data collection ideas and classification of data.
7. To suggest ways of presenting findings.

What is needed for this project? - You will need to find a question to study either during your first or second field placement. You then need to establish a background from the literature, make observations, record the data, collect any documents needed, and report findings. Findings must be placed in your portfolio and can be represented through a written paper or graphic representation. Be ready to share your findings with everyone at the end of the semester. Although you may feel intimidated by this project in the beginning, you will not be alone in this endeavor and will be given much support throughout this process.

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